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PROGRAM Newsmaker Saturday STATION CNN-TV

DATE October 11, 1986 1:30 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Discussion of U.S. Government Credibility

ANTHONY COLLINGS: A newspaper report alleging Administration efforts to deceive the news media on Libya led to the resignation of State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb.

BERNARD KALB: So you face a choice, as an American, as a spokesman, as a journalist, whether to allow oneself to be absorbed in the ranks of silence, whether to vanish into unopposed acquiescence, or to enter a modest dissent.

COLLINGS: Administration credibility also came under strain when a survivor of a plane crash in Nicaragua claimed the CIA was illegally helping supply arms to rebels. The CIA denied it. And President Reagan also denied government involvement, but he admitted the White House did know about private American help to the Contras.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: We've been aware that there are private groups and private citizens that have been trying to help the Contras, to that extent. But we did not know the exact particulars of what they're doing.

COLLINGS: Some critics on Capitol Hill thought the Administration knew a lot more than that.

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: The Administration is skating on the knife-edge of credibility.

COLLINGS: I'm Anthony Collings in Washington. Welcome to Newsmaker Saturday.

Credibility is once again an issue. Critics find it hard to believe when the Administration says the Iceland meeting

is not a summit, the Daniloff release was not an exchange for a spy, that the plane in Nicaragua had nothing to do with any government officials, and that there was no disinformation campaign over Libya.

With us to discuss disinformation and credibility are Senator William Cohen, Republican from Maine and member of the Senate Intelligence Committee; former CIA Director Stansfield Turner; and Arnaud de Borchgrave, Editor-in-Chief of the Washington Times.

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Senator Cohen, your committee apparently found no evidence that there was a disinformation campaign over Libya, and yet there was an article in the Wall Street Journal which seemed to quote Administration sources saying that Qaddafi was preparing new terrorism, and so there would be a collision course with the United States. Wasn't there a disinformation campaign?

SENATOR WILLIAM COHEN: Well, first let me be very clear. The committee itself did not make an investigation. The Chairman of the Intelligence Committee, Dave Durenberger, and the chief of staff, Bernie McMahon, made an inquiry. And they were satisfied there had been no, quote, official campaign for disinformation. Which is not the same as saying that stories did not leak into the press or were not deliberately leaked by certain individuals that may have planted false stories or misleading stories. But there was no evidence, according to their inquiry, of an official campaign orchestrated and organized by the White House.

COLLINGS: But the White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, used the word "authoritative," referring to the story, as if it were deliberate and intentional, not just...

SENATOR COHEN: I think there were individuals within the State Department, perhaps in other facets of the White House operation, of individuals who indeed did believe it was important to try and disseminate information that might keep Qaddafi, quote, off balance. I think that they now recognize the dangers in using, in any way, the U.S. media to convey information which is patently false.

COLLINGS: Admiral Turner, do you agree that there is a danger in this, or do you feel that it's a good thing?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Oh, I think disinformation can be used quite to our advantage and it's a good thing to do from time to time. But on the one extreme, you can have a disinformation program that disinforms only one person. And I could cite an actual case that I participated in where we did that very effectively for our country.

COLLINGS: Can you cite that case?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. We tried to get the ambassador of a foreign country, who was democratically inclined, to go back to his country and engage in a dispute that was going on in the government about whether it should be moved to the left. And we disinfomed this ambassador about his own status in his own country, and he went home to take care of his own problem, and we got him into the fray in fighting for the democratic side. It was a very useful thing. Didn't happen to win, but nonetheless we disinfomed him and he did do what we wanted him to do.

COLLINGS: Are you saying you lied?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes, we lied to him and we made this man believe something was going on that affected him in his home country that was not going on. But we got him back into the fray, so to speak.

On the other extreme, you can disinform the whole American public, or the whole world, practically. And in thiscase, the Administration was insensitive to the degree which they were moving away from a single disinformation to a very broad disinformation.

COLLINGS: Arnaud de Borchgrave, the Soviet Union has a campaign of disinformation, as we know. Aren't we stooping to their level when we do the same thing?

ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE: Well, first, I have to make a correction about the Wall Street Journal story. It was authoritative. As a matter of fact, what was happening in Tripoli at that time was a meeting with President Assad of Syria; Ghebril (?), a well-known Palestinian terrorist; Abu Moussa, another well-known Palestinian terrorist; the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. And French counterintelligence happens to know that they were at that very moment plotting some terrorist actions in Western Europe.

COLLINGS: But we know that Poindexter talked about Qaddafi being quiescent.

DE BORCHGRAVE: He was not quiescent. There was...

COLLINGS: Whatever reports there were, they weren't clear that he was planning new terrorism.

DE BORCHGRAVE: Because we in the media were not doing our job. They put out a statement, the Libyan news agency -- I don't know why we didn't pick it up. They said, "We are setting up special revolutionary -- secret revolutionary cells in many

Western countries in order to launch attacks against America in such a way that they will not be able to retaliate with their aircraft carriers and intercontinental ballistic missiles." This was a direct quote from the Libyan news agency.

He was not quiescent. But again, that's conventional wisdom right away, he was quiescent.

As for the Soviet Union, you know that they spend three to four billion dollars a year on active measures, which encompasses all forms of disinformation. We have printed as fact in our media countless Soviet forgeries. And I could spend the next two hours reciting them from memory.

COLLINGS: Well, don't do that, because we want to talk about American disinformation.

DE BORCHGRAVE: We don't get involved in that. We do not plant disinformation in our own media. As the Admiral said, abroad there are some disinformation operations that go on. But let's make quite clear that there is a major difference between strategic deception, which we were involved in against Qaddafi to destabilize him, psych him, psychological warfare; and all that was indeed going on, and for a very good reason. He considers himself to be in a permanent state of war with the United States.

COLLINGS: Strategic deception. Lying, in other words. Do you approve?

DE BORCHGRAVE: Strategic deception in a military context.

COLLINGS: Do you approve?

SENATOR COHEN: I think we have to draw a distinction once again. It's one thing to have ships steaming toward the coast of Libya. That is a fact if we are doing it. It's quite another to, I think, publish reports, feed reports to American journalists and suggest that there is a coup in the making to overthrow Qaddafi, that he is internally unstable, that we are giving aid and comfort, as such, to those forces who wish to overthrow him, when in fact the situation might be quite different.

As far as Qaddafi himself, it's perhaps a bad example. But nonetheless what it does is it throws that seed of disbelief or lack of credibility out there so that we are never believed. If in fact we have...

COLLINGS: We have to take a break at this point, and we will be right back.

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COLLINGS: On Newsmaker Saturday, our topic is disinformation and credibility.

Admiral Turner, in World War II the United States lied about the location of the invasion at Normandy in order to save lives of American soldiers. That was wartime. We're not at war now, and yet we are still lying. Why is that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: There are some times, even in peacetime, when you do lie. A friend of mine, for instance, was asked by a newspaperman the day that the Iranian rescue operation was actually taking place, "Is there not a rescue operation taking place?" And my friend, very appropriately, said, "No."

He called the newsman the next day and said, "I apologize. I deliberately lied to you. But there were lives at stake yesterday, and so I could not even waffle my answer to you. I had to be categoric in saying no."

COLLINGS: So when lives are at stake, it's all right. Are there any other conditions when it's all right?

DE BORCHGRAVE: We think of ourselves as being at peace and we think of peace treaties and armistices and truces and war and declarations of war. Some our adversaries in this day and age don't think that way. They consider themselves to be in a permanent state of war with Western democracies, albeit conducted through indirect means, whether it's subversion or penetration or disinformation or state-sponsored terrorism.

COLLINGS: But that's what they consider.

DE BORCHGRAVE: Yes.

COLLINGS: Why should we think the same way they do? Why should we behave the same way they do?

DE BORCHGRAVE: If people consider themselves to be at war against the citadel of capitalism -- namely, the United States -- as they call it, well, then, obviously we have to react. And you're not going to be conducting this according to the Marquis of Queensberry's rules, are you?

COLLINGS: Senator Cohen, do you think we should use the same means that they do?

SENATOR COHEN: Well, I think one of the difficulties with making such a broad statement is that if you adopt the policies that the Libyans or the Soviets or any other countries

who have declared war, active or covert, or terroristic or conventional, against the United States, it seems to me if that's the general proposition, then you can always say it's open for us to deceive the enemy. And the question is, how does one go about deceiving the enemy?

It seems to me that if we adopt that as a general policy, that it's all right to put deceptive measures into the media to convey that to keep the enemy guessing, then we have a question of when do the American people really believe that the President or the White House or the Congress is actually telling them the truth. Right now...

DE BORCHGRAVE: That's our job, Senator. As journalists, we can't be spoon-fed. When we say in our profession, "We've been lied to," that is sanctimonious, hypocritical nonsense. What government has not lied? What government has not misled or tried to mislead the press?

So, what are we? Are we journalists, or are we just conveyor belts for government information?

SENATOR COHEN: That assumes that the government is in a state of constantly lying to the press. I don't believe that to be the case.

DE BORCHGRAVE: No, it isn't. But we can see through it.

ADMIRAL TURNER: And that's what was so foolish in this case. Because the day after the Wall Street Journal printed that story, Leslie Gelb of the New York Times just decimated it in his paper because it was a bad story. And the Administration should have recognized that planting something like that in the U.S. media was bound to blow up in their face, as it did.

DE BORCHGRAVE: They did not plant it in the U.S. media. That has been determined. There was nothing planted in the U.S. media.

ADMIRAL TURNER: That certainly is not true. That's just an assertion by...

COLLINGS: Disinformation?

DE BORCHGRAVE: No. No, not at all. You can check it out. And in fact, the Intelligence Committee has checked it out. There was a memo floating around, a memo floating around -- I think the Senator can confirm this. No disinformation was planted in the U.S. media.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, that's certainly untrue.

DE BORCHGRAVE: At that time?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's certainly untrue. Now, it may not have been authorized by the President of the United States, but disinformation was planted by somebody in the Administration.

DE BORCHGRAVE: Even the Wall Street Journal will tell you that they were not victims of disinformation.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, they're trying to cover their number, too.

DE BORCHGRAVE: No. Because there were two things that were correct there, Admiral, and we just discussed them at the top of the program.

ADMIRAL TURNER: You have heard they are correct. I don't agree with what you said.

DE BORCHGRAVE: You're not part of the Administration. Here's someone who's on the Intelligence Committee.

ADMIRAL TURNER: He's not part of the Administration. He's in the Congress.

DE BORCHGRAVE: He's done his homework. And Bernie Kalb resigned on the strength of Bob Woodward's piece in the Washington Post, not on the strength of anything else he discovered.

COLLINGS: All right, but he did resign. And that implies that he felt that the Administration had lied and had, in fact, gotten caught lying.

DE BORCHGRAVE: He took Bob Woodward's piece at face value. And even Bob Woodward corrected his piece three days later.

SENATOR COHEN: The nature of the problem is, as we're seeing now with the alleged involvement in Nicaragua of the CIA, if you took a poll on the streets of America, I suppose that the majority would come back and say, "We don't believe the denial." And that is the difficulty that one has once you are perceived to have been deceiving or planting stories or not leveling with the American people. It tends to undermine everything, even when you're right. That's sort of the road you walk down. Once you take a lie and give it the perfume of truth, ultimately what happens is truth has the perfume of lies. And no matter how truthful your statement might be, it is perceived to be a falsehood. And that's the danger we run.

So, we've got to have those circumstances under which we

in fact do engage in disinformation be very, very clearly spelled out in our own minds as to when it's justified. But as a general policy, we lose, ultimately, when we are perceived to have engaged or pursue a policy of engaging in disinformation.

DE BORCHGRAVE: But haven't all Administrations had credibility gaps, Senator?

SENATOR COHEN: Oh, of course. That's a constant problem with the Congress, as well: Do we have a credibility gap between what we say and what we do?

COLLINGS: How does this Administration compare with others in terms of credibility gap?

DE BORCHGRAVE: I am yet to meet a public official, whether it's here or abroad, who doesn't speak with three voices: the on-the-record voice, beyond-the-record voice, and the background voice. And sometimes they're 180 degrees apart.

ADMIRAL TURNER: But if you look at the record, this Administration's credibility has been challenged much more often.

I look on it from a rather parochial point of view because I worry about another wave of public lack of confidence in the CIA. And these two events, the shooting down of the airplane in Nicaragua and the disinformation against Libya are reviving that again, just as we had with the mining of the harbors in Nicaragua and the manual of assassination and the assassination effort against a man named Fadlallah in Beirut. All of these...

COLLINGS: Well, what do you think is the extent of CIA involvement in Nicaragua?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I think there's very little question that the CIA is providing help and support and advice to these people who are freebooters and are doing things down there. They're doing it on the verge of the law. I don't think they're doing anything technically illegal.

COLLINGS: But when they deny it, then it's a credibility problem.

ADMIRAL TURNER: They're perfectly proper in denying it. But their credibility is bad because they're working on the wording of the law, not on the spirit and the intent of the law.

DE BORCHGRAVE: Have you noticed, Admiral, how when somebody goes down and fights against the communists in a Third World country he becomes a vulgar mercenary, and if someone is

fighting on the communists's side he is treated with awesome veneration?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I certainly don't have any veneration for the Sandinistas. I don't know what you're talking about.

DE BORCHGRAVE: No, but an American was killed fighting with the Sandinistas a couple of years ago, and it made a paragraph or two in the papers and he was called an idealist.

COLLINGS: Well, we'll take a break at this point, and then we'll be right back.

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COLLINGS: We're talking about truth, lies and, credibility....

Admiral Turner, how much long-term damage is being caused to the CIA and to the Administration by the kind of credibility gap you've been talking about?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think it's considerable because it's happened over a considerable period of time. We must remember, Tony, that the most fundamental strength of our country is a well-informed electorate, well-informed citizens. I think the citizens have been not well informed in these cases and the citizens are going to question what the government says in the future. And that will be very injurious to our democratic process.

COLLINGS: And yet you yourself say that disinformation is valid.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

COLLINGS: How can you have it both ways?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Because you don't want to disinform the American public. The instance I cited to you, the American public never knew about it, because it was a very limited disinformation program. You have to take some risks once in a while. Disinforming one person is an extreme case. Sometimes you disinform a larger group. When you do it overseas, which you really should -- you never should do it in the United States -- you are risking that it will come back into the United States media because we really have one world media. So, again, you have to be very careful about it.

Much of the disinformation the United States needs to put out really isn't disinformation. It's getting into other

countries true information by surreptitious means, often, because it won't get in any other way.

COLLINGS: We'll put that aside and just talk about disinformation.

Senator?

SENATOR COHEN: Just to correct a point. Number one, the CIA was not involved in a disinformation campaign, for openers. They are not involved.

Number two, I think that the CIA has enjoyed an increase in its stature in the past four or five years. Certainly the morale is much higher than it has been in recent years. And I think that the public has taken a different attitude toward the CIA, in view of the kind of circumstances we find ourselves in globally.

Number three, the lack of credibility, I think, starts from the top-down. A point you made in your opening statement. It seems to me incomprehensible as to why the Administration would say no deal has been made with respect to Mr. Daniloff. A deal clearly was made, a bargain was struck, and they ought to say so. Everybody else knows that. And for the Administration, the President to say, "No trade," it simply starts taking the shine off the credibility. And that tends to filter down.

But as far as the CIA is concerned, we have known for several years the Administration does want to maintain a vigorous campaign of support for the Contras. The CIA will in fact play a role in that support. Both Houses of Congress have voted for such a measure. It's waiting for conference action at this point.

So, I would say it's somewhat misleading to suggest that the CIA now has a lack of credibility. It's something that may affect all of government, to the extent that we don't level with people on items that are clearly within the public domain and which common sense tells them...

COLLINGS: Let me ask you this. Your committee has oversight responsibility for the intelligence community. How much attention do you devote to the question of disinformation, to make sure that there's no violation of the guidelines on not misleading the American public?

SENATOR COHEN: We maintain a very vigorous oversight program. I think that's why we're satisfied the CIA was not involved in any disinformation campaign. To the extent there were individuals within the White House or within the State

Department who may have briefed a reporter and gave him misinformation or disinformation, that should not be attributed to the CIA. This was specifically not a CIA program. The CIA is looked at very closely by us.

COLLINGS: Admiral, you were about to make a point.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I was going to say that it is illegal, I believe, Senator, today for the CIA to support the Contras.

SENATOR COHEN: That's correct.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Other than with intelligence support. So if...

SENATOR COHEN: Other than with communications...

ADMIRAL TURNER: Communications and intelligence. So if they had any role in the airplane incident, it was an illegality. It may not be illegal tomorrow, if the Congress passes this new law, but it has been illegal up till now, was illegal if they did something yesterday.

I think the genesis of the whole Wall Street [Journal] disinformation problem was a misinterpretation by the CIA of an intelligence report that said Qaddafi was on the verge of being able to be toppled. I think they fell for that one when they shouldn't have because they wanted to believe that.

SENATOR COHEN: Can I kind of just contradict that for a moment? The CIA was never misled by any report that said Qaddafi was on the verge of being toppled. From all the information that I saw, that clearly was not the case. That information, wherever it came, did not come from intelligence sources.

COLLINGS: Let me ask you about...

DE BORCHGRAVE: The Admiral made a point about credibility and said that it's very important that we not question our government, that we believe our government. I hope that in this profession, Admiral, we never stop questioning our government. That's part of the democratic process. Always question your government. That's what makes it a healthy society.

COLLINGS: But the government has to take into consideration the fact that it's being questioned by the press. But it has certain objectives, which include goals that can be achieved by lying, in effect.

DE BORCHGRAVE: Every Administration, Tony, tries --

every Administration, Tony, tries to manage the news...

COLLINGS: There's a conflict built in there.

DE BORCHGRAVE: ...and put the best face possible on what they're doing. And our job in the media is to try to see through it.

COLLINGS: Let me ask you about the Soviets. How much mileage do you think they will get out of the problems that have cropped up recently with Administration credibility, on Libya, on Nicaragua, on other matters?

SENATOR COHEN: Well, in a recent item that appeared in the newspaper, the Soviet Union jumped upon Secretary Weinberger's statement that the Soviets, to the extent that they pulled any troops out of Afghanistan, will only replace them with fresh troops. The Soviet paper clearly jumped on that and said, "We are surprised and shocked that a high official would engage in such, quote, a falsehood."

COLLINGS: We have only a few seconds left.

Admiral Turner, what's your view on the Soviet exploitation of this credibility problem?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I think they will do everything they can to exploit it. I'm not sure it will get them a lot of mileage, truly.

COLLINGS: Arnaud?

DE BORCHGRAVE: Our problem is that we're choirboys trying to deal with Jack the Ripper.

COLLINGS: Okay. That's all we have time for.